



ISLAMIC ART NOW
Part 2
Contemporary Art
of the Middle East

ISLAMIC ART NOW
Part 2
Contemporary Art
of the Middle East

Linda Komaroff

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

ISLAMIC ART NOW, Part 2





In recent years the parameters of Islamic art have expanded to include contemporary works by artists from, or with roots in, the Middle East. This art often has an up-to-the-minute sensibility in terms of its medium (such as video or digitally constructed images) and its political messaging, but what we have here termed “Islamic Art Now” shares the same DNA with historical Islamic art: the use of writing in the Arabic alphabet as a means of both communication and decoration, brilliant color, geometric ornament, and superb balance between design and form. These works of art provide a contemporary face to LACMA’s world-renowned Islamic art collection (currently on tour), demonstrating the deep connection between past and present, which is at the heart of an encyclopedic art museum. Of equal concern—and quite apart from our historical collection—is how the works signal the virtuosity and creativity of artists from the Middle East (and diaspora communities), whose work is at once local and global.

LACMA has only recently begun to acquire such work within the context of its holdings of Islamic art, with the understanding that the ultimate success and relevance of this collection lies in building creative links between past, present, and future. This exhibition is the second part of our first major presentation of contemporary art from the Middle East, drawn from a collection that now includes more than two hundred works. Some of the artists presented here may be new to visitors, while others are perhaps better known. What they share is not mere geography—nor is it even a common faith (as Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian artists are represented)—but a demonstrable fluency in the visual language of the Middle East and its associated cultural traditions.

The entries that follow are sequenced to reflect the order in which the works appeared in the exhibition galleries.



Ahmed Mater

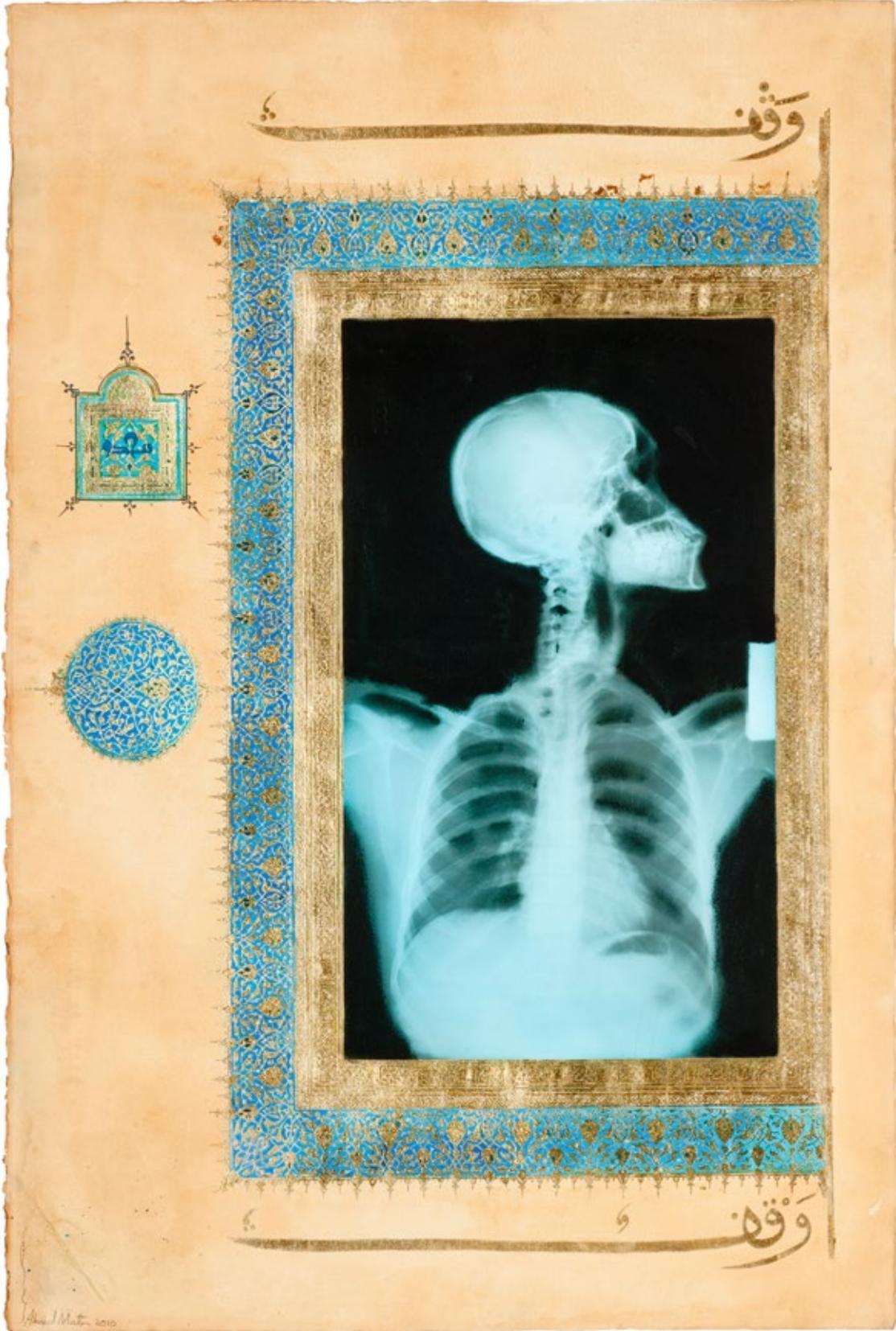
In his groundbreaking *Illumination* series, to which this pair of startling images belongs, Ahmed Mater draws inspiration from the Islamic arts of the book, most notably manuscripts of the Qur'an, whose pages were decorated with illuminated borders, chapter headings, and verse markers. He even includes the word *waqf*, a notation often found in manuscripts of the Qur'an, which in legal terms designates a charitable donation. Mater has radically expanded the scale of his illuminations, traditionally a small-scale and intimate art form, creating instead a different sense of intimacy by using his pages to frame or incorporate an X-ray of a human body. After all, what could be more intimate and personal than literally to see inside another individual? This is most eloquently expressed in his great diptychs, as here, in which a traditional type of richly illuminated double-page composition frames two X-rays set face-to-face; the skeletal images suggest an elemental form of humanity, stripped of the skin, hair, eyes, and clothes that differentiate as well as separate us.

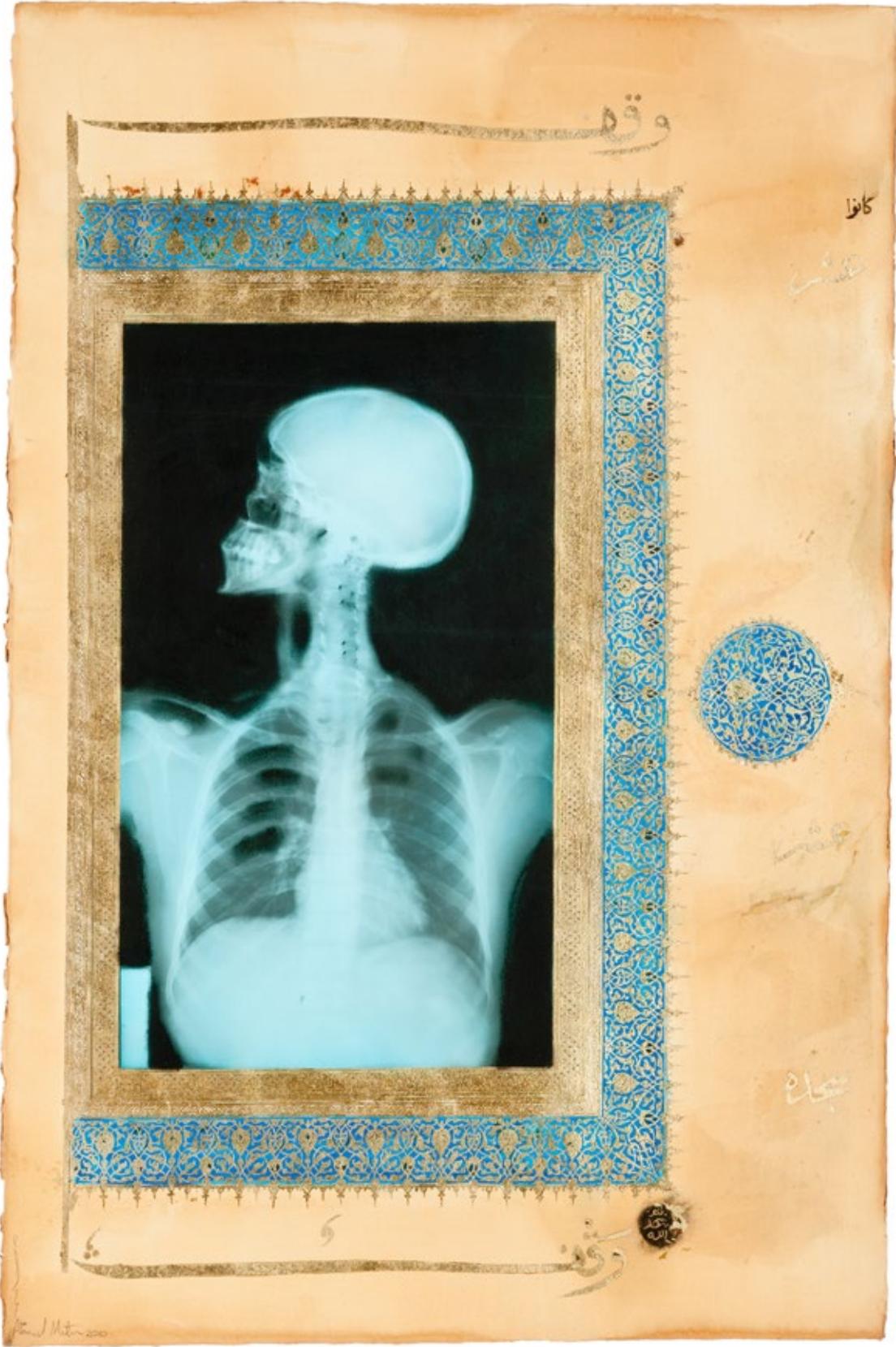
Born in Abha, Saudi Arabia, Mater is both an artist and a practicing physician. Working in photography, calligraphy, painting, installation, performance, and video, he is one of the leaders of a new generation of artists in Saudi Arabia.

- ◆ Ahmed Mater
Saudi Arabia, b. 1979
Illumination Diptych (Ottoman Waqf), 2010
Gold leaf, tea, pomegranate, Dupont
Chinese ink, and offset X-ray film print
on paper
64 × 44 ½ in. (162.6 × 113 cm) each;
64 × 89 in. (162.6 × 226.1 cm) overall
Gift of Edge of Arabia
M.2010.159a–b

Opposite: detail of *Illumination Diptych (Ottoman Waqf)*; following pages: full view of *Illumination Diptych (Ottoman Waqf)*







Sherin Guirguis

This trio of images belongs to a series inspired by the life of Huda Sha'arawi, an early twentieth-century feminist, nationalist, and founder of the Egyptian Women's Union. In the series Sherin Guirguis references a watershed event in which Sha'arawi, on her return from an international conference on women's suffrage, publically removed her face veil at the Cairo railway station. Guirguis here continues her hallmark practice of using hand-cut paper embedded with paint, gold powder, and gold leafing, but she eschews her more usual abstraction by depicting architectural elements. These windows (hence the word *shubbak*, Arabic for "window," in the title), with their traditional geometric designs, establish a connection with the Bab al-Hadid railway station, where Sha'arawi's revolutionary act precipitated the eventual disappearance of veiling among upper- and middle-class Egyptian women.

Born in Luxor, Egypt, educated in the United States, and today based in Los Angeles, Guirguis produces work that investigates the tensions between the contemporary and the traditional and between East and West. Her often bold, neon palette subtly contrasts and harmonizes with her use of geometric patterns and designs associated with traditional Islamic art.

- ◆ Sherin Guirguis
Egypt, b. 1974, active United States
Untitled (Shubbak V), 2013
Untitled (Shubbak II), 2013
Untitled (Shubbak VI), 2013
Mixed media on hand-cut paper
72 × 29 in. (182.9 × 73.7 cm)
70 × 30 in. (177.8 × 76.2 cm)
72 × 30 in. (182.9 × 76.2 cm)
Purchased with funds provided
by Angela and Isaac Larian with
additional funds provided by Art of the
Middle East: CONTEMPORARY
M.2015.9.1–.3



Ramin Haerizadeh
Hesam Rahmanian
Rokni Haerizadeh
Iman Raad

Persian miniature paintings were made to illustrate manuscripts that were often later dismantled and dispersed to satisfy the demands of modern-day collectors. Alluding to this tradition, this page emulates a detached manuscript folio. It belongs to an ongoing project currently comprising twenty-four works that visually narrate a fourteenth-century satirical text, the *Risala-i Dilqusha (Joyous Treatise)*—by the Persian poet Ubayd-i Zakani. The text accompanying each illustration explains the figural composition. This example reads: “While Muzabbid’s wife was pregnant, she looked at his face and said, ‘Woe to me if what is in my belly should look like you.’ ‘Woe to me if it should not!’ he said.”

Of the quartet of artists who produced this collaborative work, the Haerizadeh brothers—Ramin and Rokni—are by far the best known. Exhibiting widely in the region and abroad, they are distinguished by their grotesque figures and often darkly humorous commentary on contemporary culture. Hesam Rahmanian focuses primarily on painting, while Iman Raad works mainly in embroidery and graphic design.

- ◆ Ramin Haerizadeh
Iran, b. 1975, active Dubai
- Hesam Rahmanian
United States, b. 1980, active Dubai
- Rokni Haerizadeh
Iran, b. 1978, active Dubai
- Iman Raad
Iran, b. 1979
- #8, 2011–14
From the series Joyous Treatise
Mixed media
29¹⁵/₁₆ × 22¹/₁₆ in. (76 × 56 cm)
Purchased with funds provided
by Shulamit Nazarian
M.2014.229



كانت امرأة مزينة جميلة

فنفرت إلى وجهه فقال الوليد لي ان نيش بهك ما في بقى

زن مزیندا بستن بود

در روی سواد برود نگاه کرد و گفت وای برمن اگر اسپه در شکم دادم شاید تو باشی

فقال الوليد لي اذا لم نيش بهني

مزیندا گفت وای برمن اگر شید من شاید

۱۸

Hojat Amani

Hojat Amani is captivated by the notion of angels, which according to traditional Iranian Muslim belief are ever-present beings who accompany humans from birth to death; Muslim children are often still taught that at the conclusion of their prayers they should recite the *salam* gazing right and then left as a way of acknowledging the angels who record their deeds both good and bad. Amani's angels take a variety of forms and are realized in different mediums, but his most potent versions, as here, are his fallen angels, who replicate and bear the full weight of human failings. This tragic angel, dressed in the guise of a modern young Iranian woman, appears to have literally shattered in her fall to earth; the one remaining sign of her former status—her wings, here formed of golden leaves—will soon blow away or merge with other fallen leaves.

Amani studied painting at the University of Art, Isfahan, but is conversant with a variety of mediums; like many of his peers, he draws on traditional themes and tropes, often inspired by Persian poetry and miniature paintings. He sees his angels as bringing some part of heaven to today's mundane world.

- ◆ Hojat Amani
Iran, b. 1978
Fallen Angels, 2012
From the series *Angels in Paradise*
Digital image
27 ⁹/₁₆ × 43 ⁵/₁₆ in. (70 × 110 cm)
Purchased with funds provided
by Art of the Middle East:
CONTEMPORARY with additional funds
provided by Wahideh Khateeli
M.2013.153



Newsha Tavakolian

This print is from the series *Listen*, which was conceived by Newsha Tavakolian as a group of imaginary CD covers for fantasy albums by women singers, who have not been permitted to perform in public in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The unexpected image of a young woman enveloped completely in black but sporting bright red boxing gloves and standing in the middle of a deserted four-lane highway with her back to the city is meant to provoke and perhaps to confront viewers with their own preconceptions: this woman, like so many others in Iran, is a force to be reckoned with. She is part of a new generation of women who work within the system but against the status quo.

Tavakolian, a self-taught photographer, began her career as a photojournalist at the age of sixteen. Professional success came quickly, with her work published in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*. Her award-winning photo-essay *Women in the Axis of Evil* (2006) was a response to George W. Bush's characterization of Iran, and other work since that time has sought to contradict the Western media's narrow depiction of Iranian women and their lives. Tavakolian's vibrant, engaging images document the evolving role of women as they battle or subvert gender-based restrictions.

- ◆ Newsha Tavakolian
Iran, b. 1981
Untitled, 2011
From the series *Listen*
Inkjet print on paper
50 × 64 ¼ in. (127 × 163.2 cm)
Purchased with funds provided
by the Farhang Foundation, Fine Arts
Council, and an anonymous donor
M.2012.142.4



Shadi Ghadirian

Best known for her *Untitled (Qajar)* series (also in LACMA's collection), the photographer Shadi Ghadirian continues her exploration of women's identities in her second series, *Like Every Day* (2000–2001). Each image is in the form of a standard identification photograph shot against a plain white background, with the sitter's head and shoulders covered by a chador, the traditional Iranian women's garment. Rather than documenting the appearance of the sitters, the photographs seem to suppress their true identities as their faces are obscured by household items such as a broom, a teapot, a cheese grater, or a rubber glove, as in this work. According to Ghadirian, the series was inspired by the large number of cooking implements she received as wedding presents and the implications such gifts carried for her identity as a woman, a professional, and a wife, an experience that many women can relate to.

Ghadirian was born in Tehran, where she studied photography at Azad University. Her work has been widely exhibited and collected by institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum in London; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and of course LACMA, among others.

- ◆ Shadi Ghadirian
Iran, b. 1974
Untitled, 2000
From the series *Like Every Day*
Inkjet print 20 3/8 × 20 in.
(51.12 × 50.8 cm)
Purchased with funds provided
by Homa Sarshar
M.2016.3



Dadbeh Bassir

These arresting images of the Tehran skyline are part of a larger project by Dadbeh Bassir documenting the city's ever-changing and expanding urban landscape. As with much of his work, which employs physical manipulation, the photographer here constructs a disorienting and dreamlike environment by placing a mirror perpendicular to his camera lens. In Bassir's metaphoric cityscapes, skyscrapers and urban sprawl are cut off abruptly by clouds and mountaintops that incongruously descend from an ambiguous horizon line. This composite imagery reverses the familiar hierarchy between the natural and the built environments, the former asserting itself over the earthbound megalopolis by dominating the composition and creating a new, seemingly celestial city.

As he likes to note, Bassir was born in Tehran just six months before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. He graduated from Azad University of Art and Architecture, where he specialized in photography and subsequently received a diploma in digital film montage and visual effects from the Tehran Institute of Technology. His meticulously constructed compositions reflect his dual interests in photography and special effects.

- ◆ Dadbeh Bassir
Iran, b. 1978
Untitled, 2005–14
From the series Tehran
Chromogenic prints
21 × 31 in. (53.3 × 78.7 cm) each
Purchased with funds provided
by Laila and Mehran Taslimi
M.2015.184.1–5

Opposite and following pages:
Tehran series







Maimouna Guerresi

In her monumental photographic series *Giants* (2007–10), Maimouna Guerresi used family members and other nonprofessional models to create imaginary characters that morph dramatically into mystical, metaphysical beings whose human forms merge with architectural spaces and black voids. Here the statuesque figures of *Rhokaya* and *Akbar* are robed in layers of brightly colored cloth, which seemingly surround empty cavities that contradict their corporeality; Guerresi has likened them to tectonic structures containing a body “as empty as an unknown universe.” Their spiritualism and superhuman scale were inspired by the Muridiyya of Senegal, the Sufi order to which Guerresi belongs; their poses are drawn from Western art traditions but not their faces or intended meaning.

Guerresi is an Italian-born artist who converted to Islam, joining a Sufi community in Senegal in the early 1990s. Today she divides her time between Verona, Milan, and Dakar, working in photography, video, sculpture, and installation art. Her personal and professional background, and the strong emphasis she places on her faith and spiritual transformation as visualized through her art, makes Guerresi a natural fit within the genre of Islamic art today.

- ◆ Maimouna Guerresi
Italy, b. 1951, active Senegal and Italy
Akbar, 2010
From the series *Giants*
Lambda print
78 ¾ × 49 ¼ in. (200 × 125.1 cm)
Purchased with funds provided
by Nooshin Malakzad with additional
funds provided by Art of the
Middle East: CONTEMPORARY
M.2016.1.1

Rhokaya, 2010
From the series *Giants*
Lambda print
78 ¾ × 49 ½ × 1 in.
(200 × 124.6 × 2.5 cm)
Purchased with funds provided by Beth
Rudin DeWoody with additional funds
provided by the Ralph M. Parsons Fund
M.2016.1.2

Opposite: detail of *Akbar*; following
pages: full views of *Akbar* and *Rhokaya*





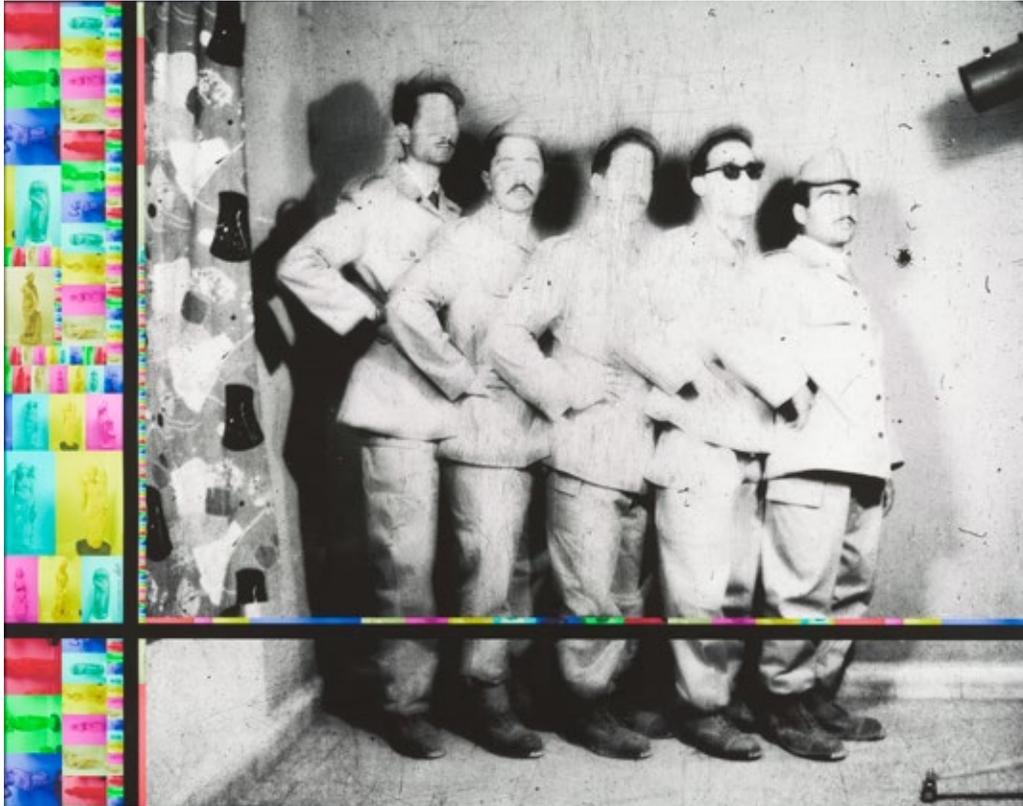


Ammar Al Beik

Ammar Al Beik is one of a growing group of Arab artists whose work focuses on the state of image making, past and present, by incorporating old archival and found photographs. These remade images document, conflate, and obscure ideas of history and memory in a society that has been in almost constant turmoil for decades. In these two prints, which are part of a larger series, old black-and-white images, each with five young men—one showing a troupe of bodybuilders striking poses and the other a studio shot of uniformed but unarmed soldiers—capture a happier, seemingly playful time that is contradicted by the ominously contemporary titles given to the works. As a frame, Al Beik uses wildly chromatic thumbnail depictions of ancient goddesses preserved in the National Museum, Damascus.

Based in Berlin, Al Beik is a conceptual artist, photographer, and award-winning filmmaker. His interest in the circulation of images has to do with the manipulation of memories and their impact on current religious divisions and political events, especially as they relate to his Syrian homeland.

- ◆ Ammar Al Beik
Syria, b. 1972, active Germany
The Strong Believers, 2008
Maximum Alert, 2008
Archival print on cotton paper
43 ⁵/₁₆ × 55 ¹/₈ in. (110 × 140 cm) each
Anonymous gift
M.2013.39.5, .7



Abbas Kowsari

This pair of seemingly homoerotic images is part of a larger group documenting a government-sponsored national bodybuilding championship in Tehran. In one, the photographer Abbas Kowsari has deliberately captured and frozen in time an onstage kiss between two contestants, perhaps a congratulatory gesture but eroticized by their shiny, rippling, nearly nude bodies pulled close together by their handshake. The other photograph shows a heavily spray-tanned contestant striking an offstage pose for the camera, while through windows behind him young men peer in, one of them filming with his mobile phone. The frenzy of the voyeurs contrasts with the still concentration of the bodybuilder, who, despite his well-muscled physique, appears naked and vulnerable to their visual onslaught.

Kowsari has worked as a photojournalist and photo editor for a number of leading Iranian newspapers, most of them, as he has pointed out, now banned. As a documentarian of everyday life in Iran, he captures imagery not commonly seen in the Western media, while his press credentials have provided him with rare opportunities as a fine art photographer. Along with Newsha Tavakolian (whose work is also included here), he belongs to a new generation of artists who use and manipulate photography to create a subtle commentary on contemporary Iranian society.

- ◆ Abbas Kowsari
Iran, b. 1970
*Tehran Azadi Stadium—National
Championship of Iranian Bodybuilders*,
2006
From the series *Masculinity 2*
Print on metallic photography paper
27 ¹/₁₆ × 39 ³/₁₆ in. (70 × 100 cm) each
Purchased with funds provided
by Harvey and Beth Plotnick
M.2015.97.1–2



Hassan Hajjaj

Hassan Hajjaj depicts a globalized society in which the margins of cultural identity—whether African, Arab, or European—are continuously shifting and blurred. Some of his sitters are deliberately clothed, posed, or framed so as to create a conscious friction with Western stereotypes. Clad in traditional fabrics, clothes, and shoes, often branded with Louis Vuitton or Nike logos, and posed in the manner of international fashion models, rock stars, or sports heroes, his subjects bridge the gap between folk and chic, now and then, and us and them, reflecting a brilliant fusion of Moroccan street style and contemporary art. In *Feetball*, Hajjaj injects global brands with North African style, as seen in the *babouche* (Moroccan slipper) emblazoned with the Nike logo. Here, as with many of his photographs, Hajjaj created a frame specifically for this image, into which he has inserted colorful plastic children's blocks, complementing the diminutive pairs of feet in the photograph.

Hajjaj was born in Larache, a small harbor town in northern Morocco. He moved to London as a teenager and now divides his time between that city and Marrakesh. Increasingly well known for his photographs, Hajjaj is also a filmmaker and a designer.

- ◆ Hassan Hajjaj
Morocco, b. 1961, active England
and Morocco
Feetball, 2006
Chromogenic print, wood frame,
and plastic blocks
24 ½ × 34 × 1 ⅜ in. (62.2 × 86.4 × 3.5 cm)
Purchased with funds provided by Art
of the Middle East: CONTEMPORARY
M.2013.198

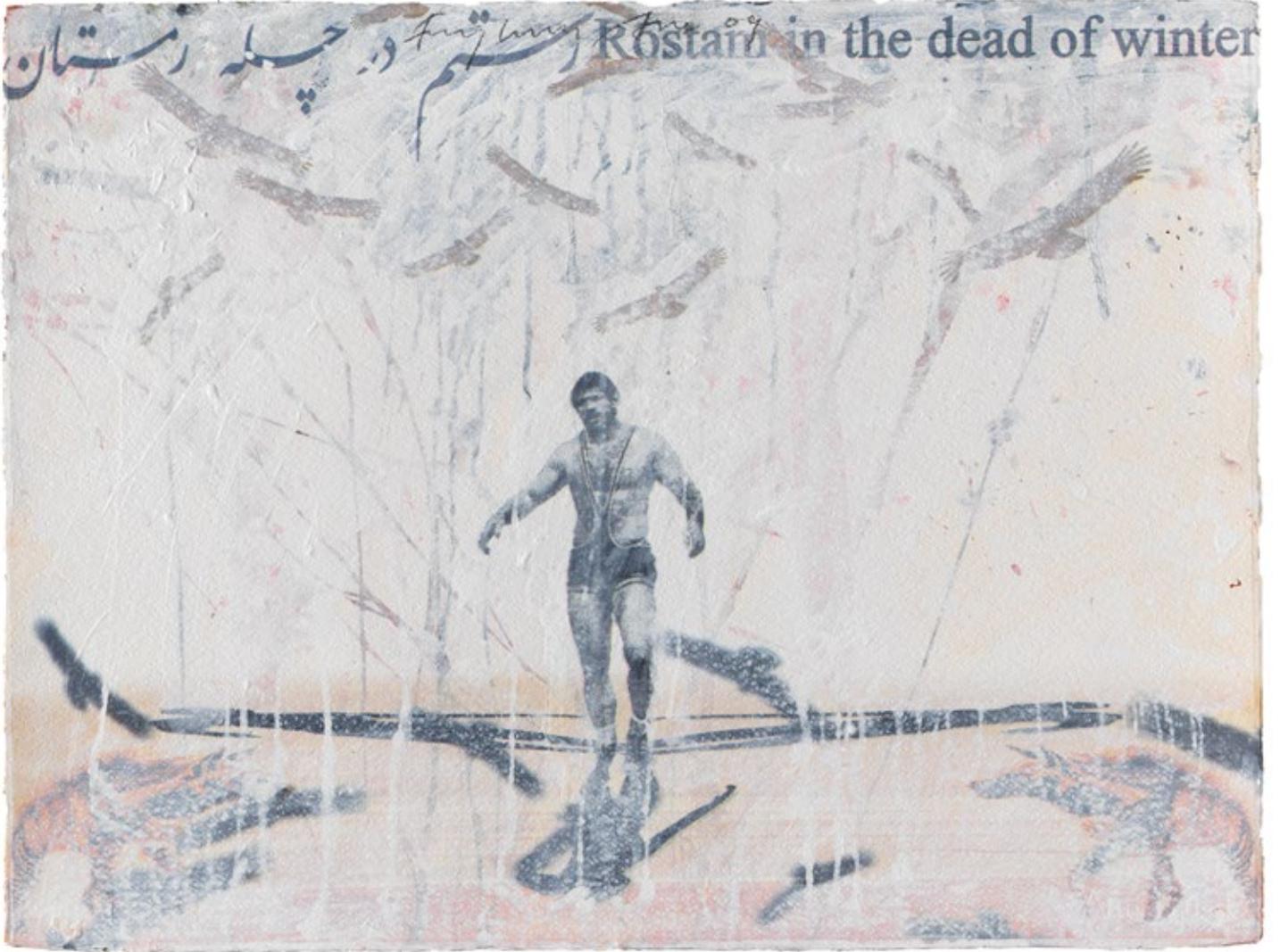


Fereydoun Ave

Many artists in postrevolutionary Iran are inspired by the long-ago kings and heroes from Persian literature and art, which they recycle as paradigms of virtue or as objects of derision to capture a world caught between a mythical past and an ever-dwindling present. Such is the case with this compelling image based on Rostam, the Hercules-like hero of the Iranian national epic, the *Shahnama*, or *Book of Kings*. Here the great champion, in the guise of a wrestler, is shown in a sinister setting replete with ravenous vultures and hyenas and blood-like paint splashes. Unlike traditional illustrated narratives of the *Shahnama* depicting Rostam, this nonnarrative version reflects the somber ambivalence of the overwhelmed hero.

Born in Tehran in 1945, Fereydoun Ave completed his early education in England and subsequently moved to the United States to study applied art, theater, and cinema. He belongs to the influential first generation of Iranian artists who received their arts education in the West. Ave returned to Iran in 1970 and was caught up in and influenced by the cultural fervor and internationalism of prerevolutionary Tehran. At present he mainly divides his time between Tehran and Paris, where he continues to work and inspire younger Iranian artists.

- ◆ Fereydoun Ave
Iran, b. 1945, active Iran and France
Rostam in the Dead of Winter, 2009
Inkjet print and mixed media
on handmade paper
22½ × 30 in. (57.2 × 76.2 cm)
Purchased with funds provided
by Shidan Taslimi
M.2015.189



Siamak Filizadeh

Rostam is the greatest warrior of the *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*), completed in the early eleventh century but still read and admired even today. A new, contemporary version of the mighty paladin is represented in this print.

Known as Rostam II, he has been recast as a bazooka-toting, bare-chested bodybuilder. Encircling his waist is a Dolce and Gabbana belt, from which hangs a mobile phone, and around his wrist is a Rolex watch; the letter *R* is displayed on his chest, covering an insignia reminiscent of the Superman logo. Only the masklike drawing of Rostam's face, which includes his characteristic leopard-headed helmet, is a bow to past depictions of the legendary champion.

Trained as a graphic designer, Siamak Filizadeh frequently and expertly uses the visual language of advertising not only to genially mock the consumerist ambitions of a certain segment of Iranian society but also to ironically highlight the official proscriptions on the imported luxury goods that they crave. In his series Rostam II, to which this print belongs, Filizadeh portrays the great Iranian mythical hero in the context of present-day Tehran. The only thing left unstated is which master this new Rostam serves.

- ◆ Siamak Filizadeh
Iran, b. 1970
*Rostam II Returns at the Age of 30 Having
Been Brought Up Abroad*, 2009
From the series Rostam II
Digital print on canvas
55 × 41 ¹⁵/₁₆ in. (139.7 × 106.5 cm)
Purchased with funds provided
by the Karl Loring Trust and Art of the
Middle East: CONTEMPORARY
M.2011.45.2



دیزاینر ایلو پانتونی و پیرسینگ پورتر لاند همبند سال ۱۹۸۱ آنکونین
 تریه فیلیکس تاکسین
 آنتاب و ژو بمل وک پینون جابترین مرد قرن
 راست روگر گلا - ۸۰ دلار
 کلاه کادالیه - ۱۸۰ دلار
 شلوار جوتو آرفانی - ۱۳۰ دلار کورن و پر کلمانا - ۲۰ دلار
 سوزان توآ توآ بریلان - ۶۰ دلار

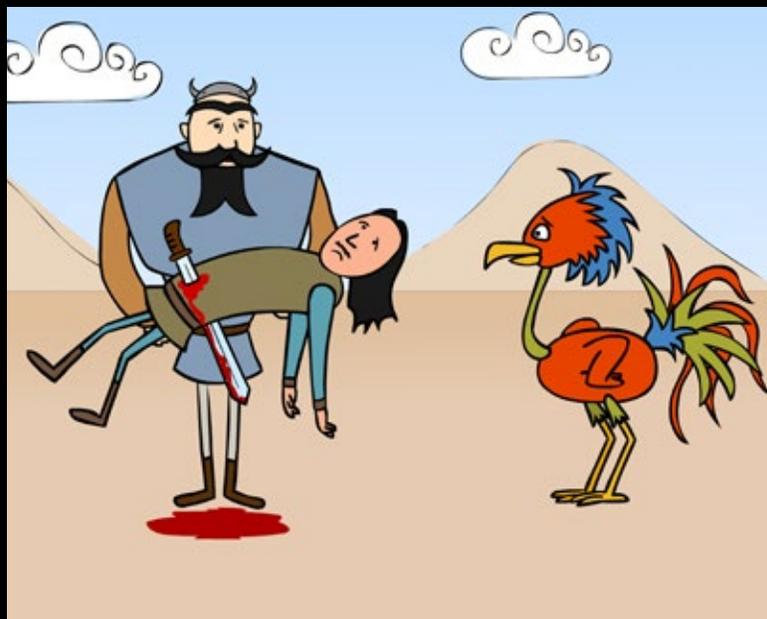
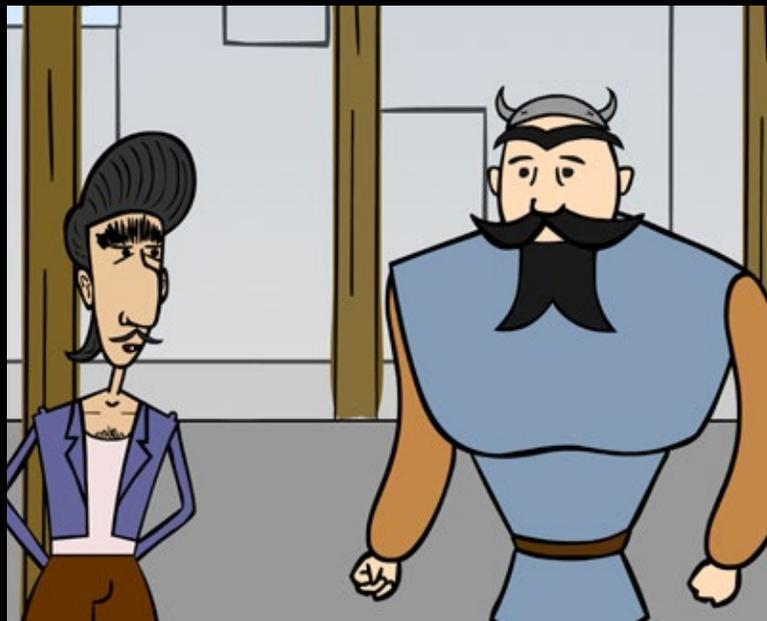
Pouya Afshar Soroush Rezaee

As with other literary masterpieces, the *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*) has an appeal and an elasticity that have allowed successive generations to discover or invent new meanings. Inspired by the text, many contemporary Iranian artists elect to bypass its universalities in favor of more specific social commentary. In this animated video, Rostam, the great hero of the *Shahnama*, is transplanted to the twenty-first century, where he struggles with the comically absurd and all-too-realistic trials of everyday life in Iran: inflation, drug addiction, extreme plastic surgery, and the harsh realities of economic sanctions.

Pouya Afshar, the creator and producer of the Rostam in Wonderland series, is a multimedia artist and professor at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, where he teaches animation and interactive media. His work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions in Los Angeles and Tehran. Soroush Rezaee is an animator whose Tehran-based studio, Sooriland, has produced numerous popular web series. He wrote, directed, and animated the Rostam in Wonderland videos.

- ◆ Pouya Afshar
Iran, b. 1984, active United States
Soroush Rezaee
Iran, b. 1983
Sohrab's Blood, 2012
Collaboration between [P]ART Collective
and Sooriland
From the series Rostam in Wonderland
Single-channel video, color, sound;
5:04 min.
Gift of the artist
M.2015.68.1-.3

Opposite: details of *Sohrab's Blood*



Kamran Sharif

The Shrine of Imam Reza, in Mashhad, is the heart of Shi'ite Iran, while its lofty gold-tiled dome is the most emblematic image of Iran's state religion. It is also the impetus for this sculpture, which juxtaposes two shiny golden domes, one right side up and the other upside down, united by a slender shaft. This configuration gives the composition a tensile, even malleable quality, in contrast to the inherent rigidity of the bronze material as well as the tectonics of the inspirational dome. Such implied flexibility, along with the duplication and inversion of the iconic dome, visualize the artist Kamran Sharif's belief that multiple directions and paths may lead to God and spiritual enlightenment.

Born in Tabriz, Iran, Sharif studied at the Mirak School of Visual Arts, where he began his career as a sculptor; he is especially at home working with bronze for both large- and small-scale compositions. This sculpture belongs to a series currently in production. Sharif has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Iran and the United States, where he is based today.

- ◆ Kamran Sharif
Iran, b. 1978, active United States
Untitled, 2015
Copper alloy
29½ × 9 in. (74.9 × 22.9 cm)
Purchased with funds provided by Art
of the Middle East: CONTEMPORARY
M.2015.185



Elham Rokni

This sweetly absurd video records a young man attempting to cross a sand dune on a bicycle. The difficulty and preposterousness of his task become apparent as he rides along a set of boards that pave his path for a short distance. Then he must stop to move the boards, creating another brief stretch of passable ground, only to begin again. His laborious journey—of unknown purpose and destination—is simultaneously frustrating and humorous, bringing to mind both Sisyphus and Buster Keaton and serving perhaps as a universal metaphor for any seemingly insurmountable undertaking. For the creator of the video, Elham Rokni, it has a more personal meaning pertaining to her own physical challenges.

Born in Iran in 1980, Rokni immigrated to Israel in 1989. She received her bachelor of fine arts and master of fine arts from Bezalel Academy, Tel Aviv, and her work has been the subject of numerous group and solo exhibitions in Israel, the United States, and Europe. Much of Rokni's video work directly addresses her own complex identity, and some projects have used surveillance-style filming to capture staged, purposely ambiguous events that are both unsettling and amusing.

- ◆ Elham Rokni
Iran, b. 1980, active Israel
Crossing the Dune, 2010
Single-channel video, color, silent;
5:50 min.
Purchased with funds provided
by Laila and Mehran Taslimi
M.2015.186.1-.3

Opposite: details of *Crossing the Dune*



Burhan Doğançay

Burhan Doğançay was one of Turkey's foremost contemporary artists; he is also well known internationally, particularly for his Urban Walls series, begun in the 1960s. For this series, he traveled worldwide, documenting with his camera city walls covered with curled and mangled advertisements, posters, and graffiti, which he reconstructed into new narratives in his paintings and collages. Doğançay built on his earlier work in this beautiful pair of abstract compositions, in which brightly intense curvilinear forms seem to burst forth from flat, solid-colored backgrounds. Inspired by Islamic calligraphy, the graceful ribbonlike shapes take on a three-dimensional quality, especially as suggested by the implied shadows in the earlier of the two works. Both are from the aptly titled series Ribbons (1972–89).

Doğançay studied law in Turkey and economics in France, but in 1963, while working as a diplomat in New York, he saw a torn orange poster spattered with mud, which he described as “the most beautiful abstract painting,” thus inspiring his first and longest-running series, Urban Walls. Doğançay's work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and the British Museum in London, among many others.

- ◆ Burhan Doğançay
Turkey, 1929–2013
Ribbon 47, 1981
Ribbon 46, 1982
From the series Ribbons
Gouache on paper
29 ¹⁵/₁₆ × 22 ⁷/₁₆ in. (76 × 57 cm)
Anonymous gift
M.2015.160.2–3



Faig Ahmed

Carpets are perhaps the best-known form of Islamic art, and most famous of all are those from Iran and its immediate neighbors. Contemporary artists from the region draw inspiration from this traditional art form—sometimes to remarkable effect, as here. In this strikingly surrealistic take on the classic northwest Iranian or Azerbaijani carpet, which has been designed specifically for LACMA, something dark appears to be oozing out of the piece, causing it to fold in on itself or perhaps even melt.

Faig Ahmed lives and works in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, which, along with the similarly named province across the border in the Islamic Republic of Iran, was the main region for the production of classical “Persian” carpets. Carpet weaving is therefore a cornerstone of Ahmed’s cultural heritage. Although he works in other mediums—painting, video, and installation—he is best known for his woven pieces based on traditional local carpet designs, which he deconstructs and remakes to form something entirely contemporary. Sometimes his carpets take on a three-dimensional or even kinetic quality—optical illusions worked out in advance on a computer before the rugs are woven by hand.

- ◆ Faig Ahmed
Azerbaijan, b. 1982
Essence, 2015
Wool, knotted pile
39 ³/₈ × 59 ¹/₁₆ in. (100 × 150 cm)
Gift of Raushan Sapar
M.2015.187

Opposite: detail of *Essence*; following
pages: full view of *Essence*



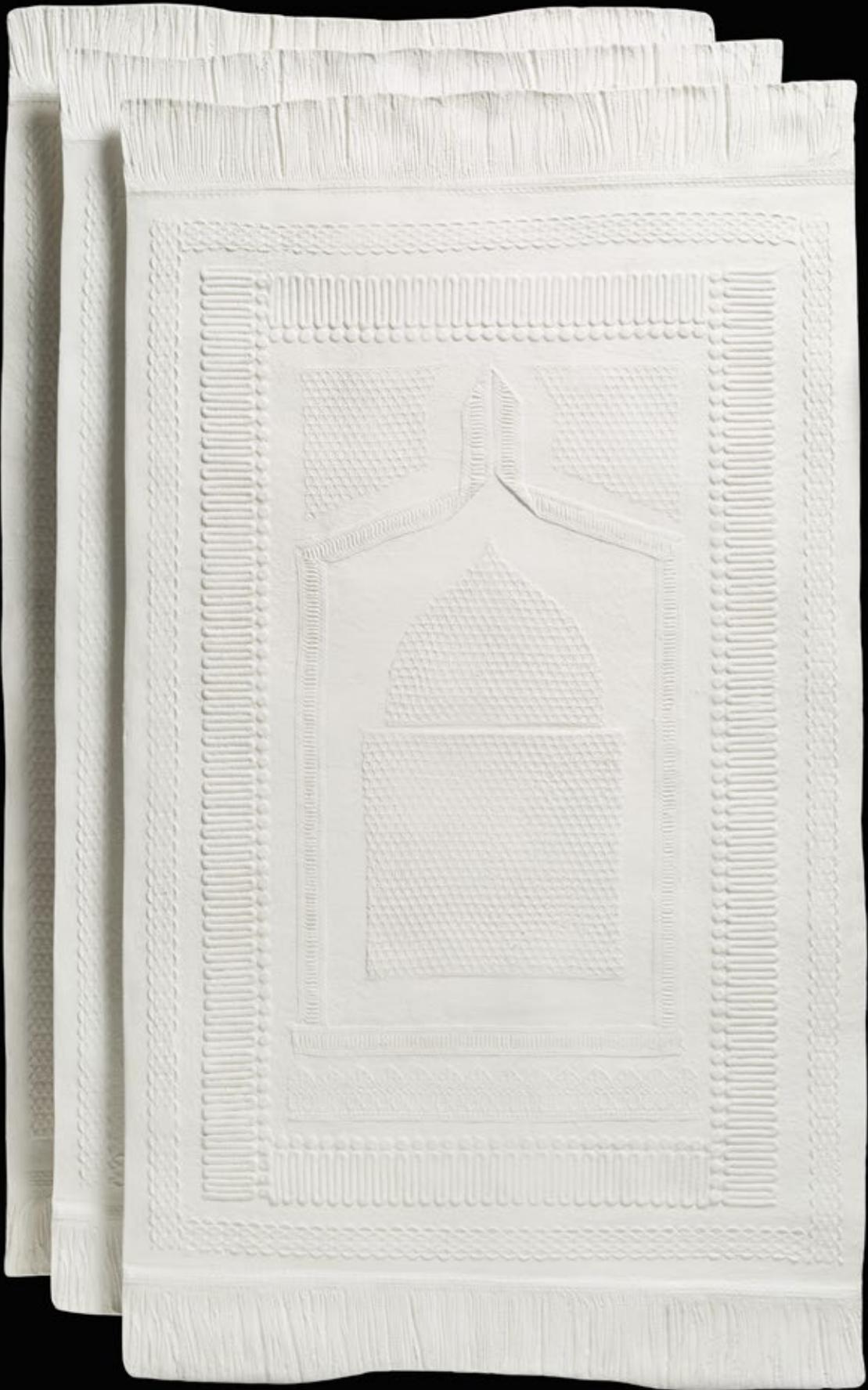




Maimouna Guerresi

As part of their daily prayer rituals, Muslims perform a series of bows and prostrations while facing toward Mecca, which include touching their heads to the ground. Mats or rugs provide a soft, clean, and personal space, especially as prayer is often said in private rather than in congregation. This trio of mold-made resin carpets emulates the traditional prayer carpet with a niche design in the center pointing toward the *qibla*, or direction of prayer. Given their hard material, these are symbolic rather than functional carpets, signifying the importance of the act of prayer five times a day, which is one of the Pillars of Islam.

- ◆ Maimouna Guerresi
Italy, b. 1951, active Senegal and Italy
White Carpets, 2006
Resin
 $44 \frac{1}{8} \times 24 \frac{13}{16} \times \frac{13}{16}$ in.
(112 × 63 × 2 cm) each
Purchased with funds provided
by JoAnn Busuttill
M.2016.1.3--5



Wafaa Bilal

This disturbing image shows a covered market in which sunlight filtering through the damaged roof reveals rather than dispels the eerie, dust-covered devastation of war. Devoid of human life, this tableau conveys a stillness that amplifies the feeling of annihilation. Still more unsettling is the realization that the market is actually a small-scale model magnified dramatically by the photograph. The scene is a handmade miniature reconstruction of one of the many media images documenting the destruction caused during the decadelong war in Iraq (2003–13).

Wafaa Bilal, an associate arts professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, fled Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1991. He is known internationally for his provocative performance pieces and interactive works. In the series *Ashes*, to which this photograph belongs, the ashes covering the models include human remains. The powerful photographs capture and reflect Bilal's own reactions to the war as an exiled Iraqi who experienced the devastation of his home not merely through media imagery but also through the deaths of his father and brother.

- ◆ Wafaa Bilal
Iraq, b. 1966, active United States
Market, 2003–13
From the series *Ashes*
Archival inkjet
41 × 50 in. (104.1 × 127 cm)
Anonymous gift
M.2013.185

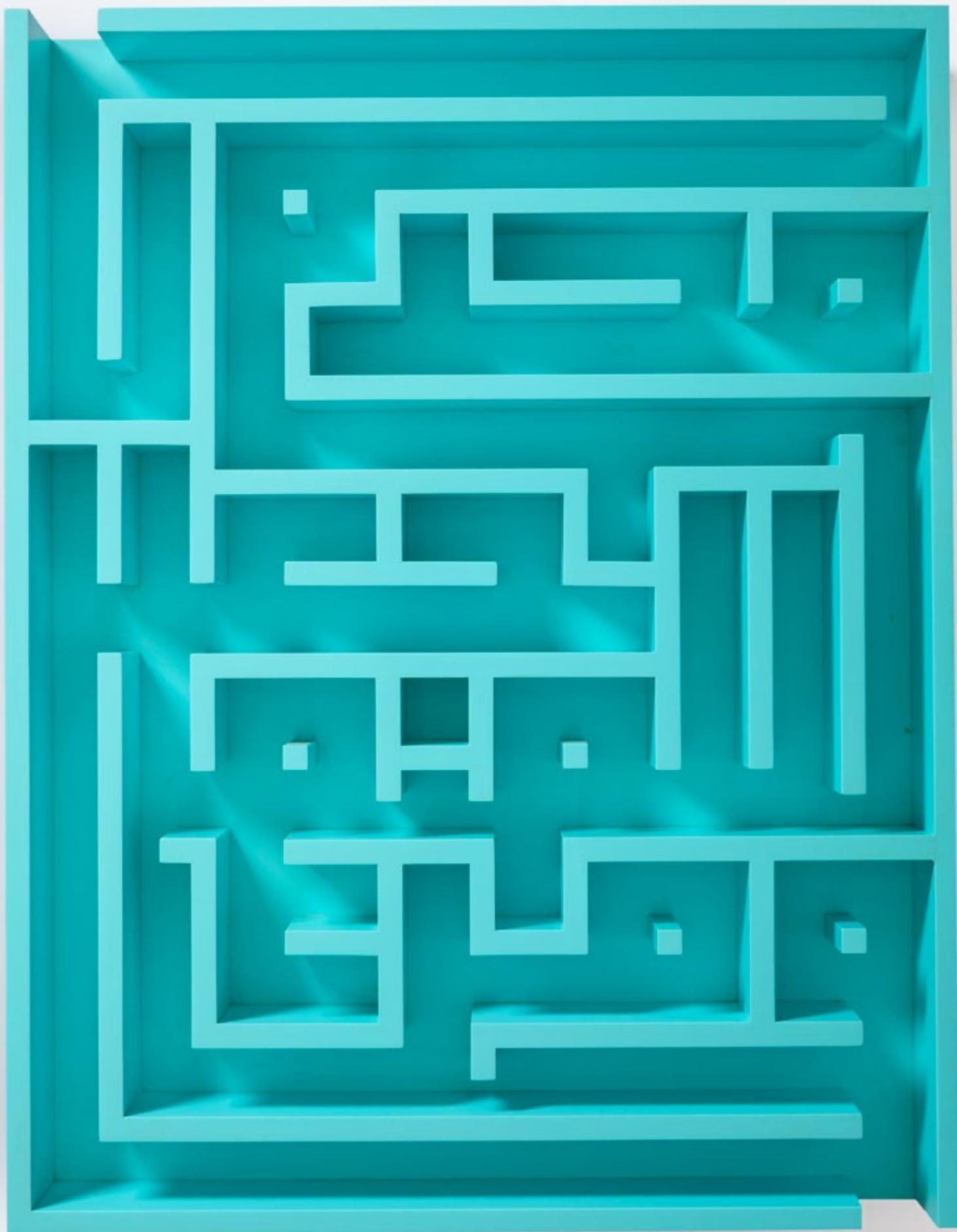


Nasser Al Salem

In the Islamic world calligraphy has always been regarded as the noblest form of art because of its association with the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book. Trained as both a calligrapher and an architect, Nasser Al Salem has developed a unique approach to writing. He focuses on the words and their meaning, medium, and aesthetic, resulting in multivalent, highly nuanced, and engaging works. In this three-dimensional calligraphy, rendered in "square Kufic" script, he cleverly transforms the namesake Qur'anic verse "Whoever obeys Allah, he will make for him a way out" into a maze; remarkably, his calligraphic composition not only renders the words of the verse but visually re-creates its meaning.

Al Salem has exhibited with the arts initiative Edge of Arabia in Istanbul and in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. His work was included in the British Museum's exhibition *Hajj* (2012), and he was short-listed for the 2013 Jameel Prize. While his work is strongly influenced by Islamic faith and tradition, he often employs nontraditional mediums such as neon, video, and even sand for his calligraphy, in addition to the more customary ink on paper. He is one of the most innovative calligraphers of his generation.

- ◆ Nasser Al Salem
Saudi Arabia, b. 1984
*Whoever Obeys Allah, He Will Make
for Him a Way Out*, 2012
Corian
47 ¼ × 36 ½ × 5 ⅛ in.
(120 × 92.7 × 13 cm)
Purchased with funds by an anonymous
donor
M.2015.99

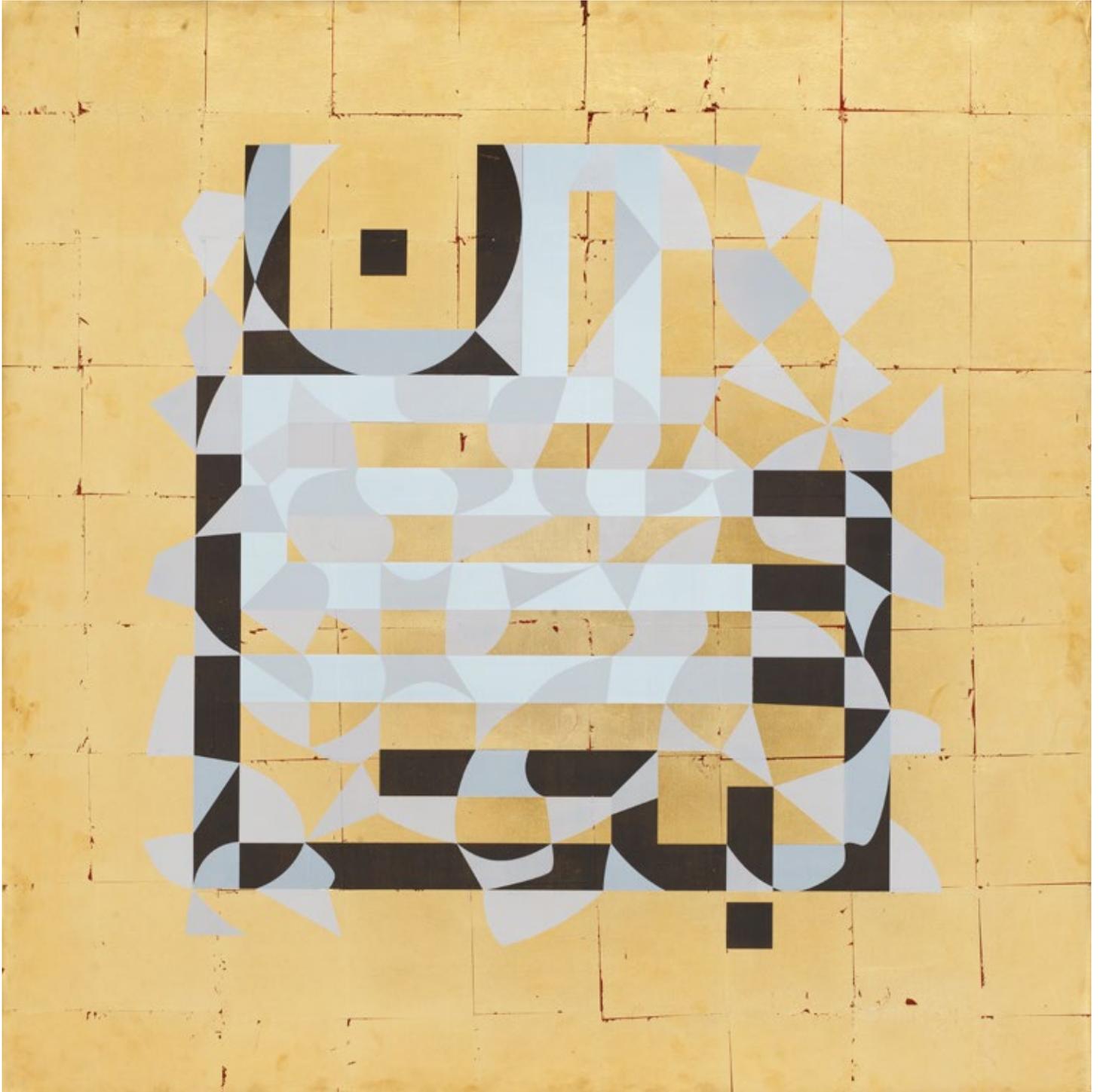


Lulwah Al Homoud

Lulwah Al Homoud is considered to be a pioneer in Saudi Arabia's dynamic contemporary art movement but one who has not rejected the past. She has said, "If you decide to break the rules, you have to master them well first," and indeed Al Homoud studied traditional calligraphy as well as the history of the theoretical and proportional systems on which this art is based. She uses the time-honored Islamic calligrapher's tools of ink, gold, and paper but to totally new and brilliant effect. Building on the underlying geometry of the classical letterforms, she creates abstract compositions that are nonetheless legible. Such is the case with the beautiful *Subhan Allah* (Glorified is God), which typifies the seamlessly spiritual and conceptual nature of her best works.

Al Homoud studied art and design in London, earning a bachelor of arts from the American College, and a master of arts from the College of Arts and Design. Currently based in Dubai, she has participated in international exhibitions and installations in London, Paris, and Shanghai, among other places. She not only represents the new cohort of Saudi artists but also is an inspiration to a rising generation of young Saudi women.

- ◆ Lulwah Al Homoud
Saudi Arabia, b. 1967, active
United Kingdom and Dubai
Subhan Allah, 2014
Silkscreen on archival paper with
gold leaf
48 ¹/₁₆ × 48 ¹/₁₆ in. (122 × 122 cm)
Purchased with funds provided by Art
of the Middle East: CONTEMPORARY
M.2016.2

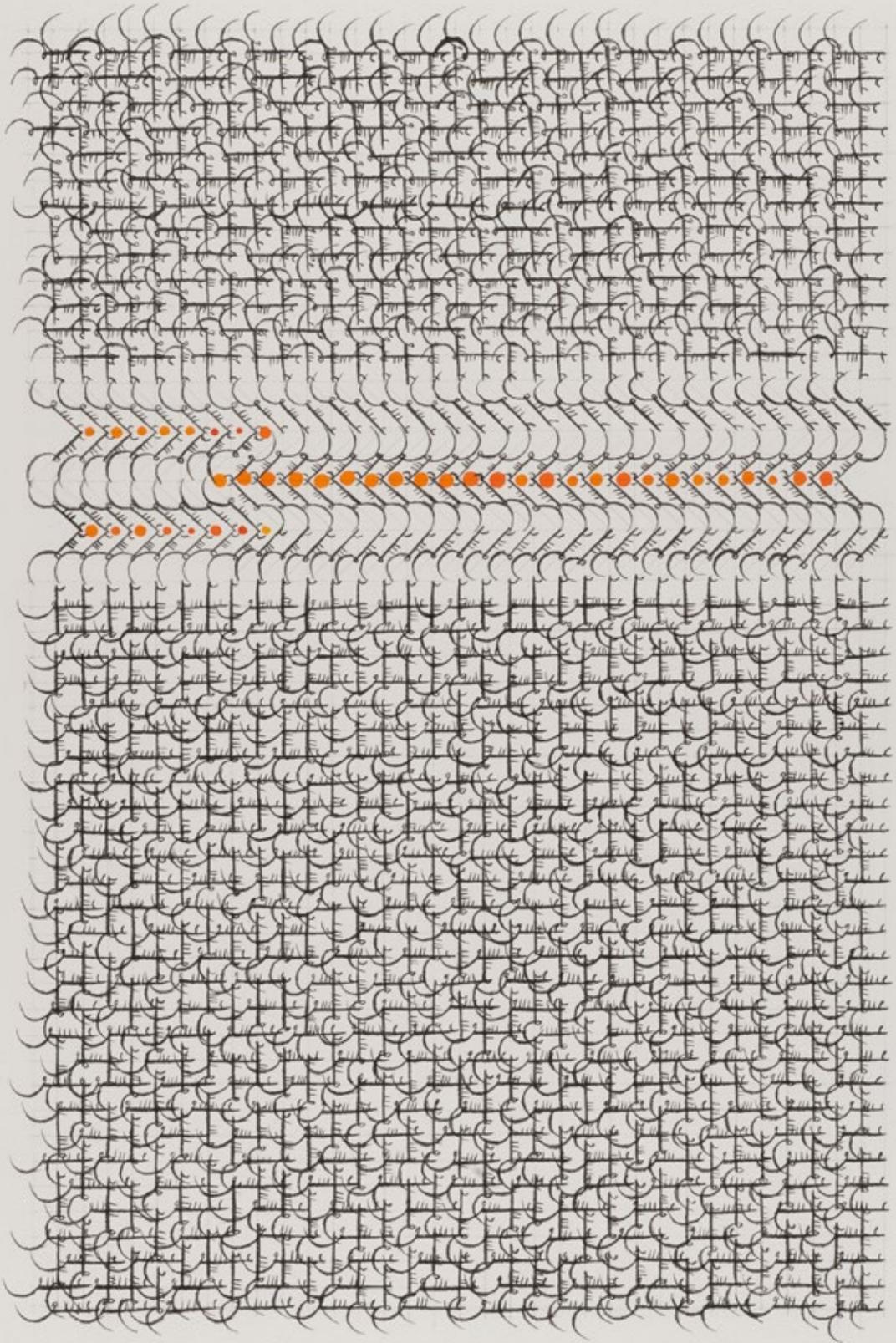


Hadieh Shafie

The abstract network of design that defines this composition was inspired by Islamic calligraphy, in particular a medieval Persian manuscript page. Although the contemporary work is on a vastly expanded scale, the black-marked band of design punctuated by orange dots is reminiscent of the illuminated headers that frame the titles of chapters and sections of the traditional manuscript, while the black marks above and below suggest the text. In fact, this is an actual text—the single Persian word *'Eshq* (love), in which the curvilinear letters overlap, intersect, and are hypnotically repeated to form an abstract, grid-like design.

Born in Tehran, Hadieh Shafie received her training in the United States, where she currently resides, earning a master of fine arts in painting from Pratt Institute. She was a finalist for the 2011 Jameel Prize, and her work was presented in the related international traveling exhibition. Shafie works mainly with paper, sometimes creating three-dimensional compositions from tiny Persian inscribed rolls of colored paper or else using paper as a platform for her calligraphy, as in this work.

- ◆ Hadieh Shafie
Iran, b. 1969, active United States
Grid 30, 2013
Ink and acrylic on paper
29½ × 20½ in. (74.9 × 52.1 cm)
Purchased with funds provided by
Art of the Middle East: CONTEMPORARY
with additional funds provided by
Catherine Benkaim and Barbara Timmer
M.2014.8



Iman Safaei

Calligraphy is the most pervasive element in Islamic art. The preoccupation with beautiful writing in both historical and contemporary art extends beyond scripture to secular and even banal texts. This calligraphic sculpture takes the form of the colloquial Persian expression *Sepeleshk*, which is roughly equivalent to the popular American phrase “no way.” It has been suggested that this saying may have originated among gamblers unsuccessfully throwing dice, indicating that it once had a somewhat coarser meaning. *Sepeleshk* is one of a series of commonplace expressions, tongue twisters, nursery rhymes, and slogans that Iman Safaei has used in his calligraphic work, rendered in iron, brass, and neon, at small and large scale. These works speak to the ubiquity of writing in modern-day society as a means of both artistic expression and communication, regardless of the significance of the message.

Still best known in Iran, especially as a graphic artist, Safaei has participated in group and solo exhibitions in Tehran, as well as in London, New York, Miami, and Basel.

- ◆ Iman Safaei
Iran, b. 1982
Sepeleshk, 2014
Iron
18 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 46 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
(48 × 117.5 × 51.5 cm)
Purchased with funds provided
by the HAND Foundation with additional
funds provided by Clare Wagner
M.2015.181



Shoja Azari

Classical Persian miniature painting, which belongs to the small-scale art of book illustration, presents a whimsically implausible and idealized world created through expert draftsmanship; rich, jewel-like colors; and carefully contrived landscape and architectural settings. As has often been noted, in Persian painting it is always a perfect day. In his disquieting work *Idyllic Life*, Shoja Azari builds on and plays against this precious art form. His starting point is a projected image of a vastly magnified sixteenth-century manuscript page depicting an arcadian setting of a princely palace and surrounding town. A series of video clips are inserted into the projected painting, disrupting the idyllic scene with disturbing and sometimes violent vignettes drawn from contemporary Iranian life.

Born in Shiraz, Iran, in 1958, Azari began making short films as a teenager before moving to New York in 1983. As a visual artist and filmmaker, he is best known for his collaborations with Shirin Neshat, including the video work *Turbulent* (1998) and the feature film *Women without Men* (2009). *Idyllic Life* belongs to Azari's solo series of "video paintings," in which he animates traditionally static paintings with contemporary video footage.

- ◆ Shoja Azari
Iran, b. 1958, active United States
Idyllic Life, 2012
High-definition video, color, sound;
10:11 min.
Purchased with funds provided by
Anousheh and Ali Razi, Shirine Reza,
Wahideh Khaleeli, Darioush and Shahpar
Khaledi, Chahla Aryana, Hormoz and
Fariba Ameri, Angela and Isaac Larian
M.2015.104.1-6

Opposite: detail of *Idyllic Life*



Special thanks to Sandra Williams in Art of the Middle East for her assistance throughout. We are especially grateful to the donors and Art of the Middle East: CONTEMPORARY council members, whose interest and generosity have enabled us to build a significant collection, a small part of which is reflected here, in less than a decade.

Published in conjunction with the installation *Islamic Art Now, Part 2: Contemporary Art of the Middle East* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California (January 24, 2016–February 12, 2017).

Copyright © 2015 Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Cover: Newsha Tavakolian, *Untitled* (detail), 2011, see also p. 17; p. 3: Hojat Amani, *Fallen Angels* from the series *Angels in Paradise*, 2012, see also p. 15; p. 5: Sherin Guirguis, *Untitled (Shubbak V)*, 2013 (detail); p. 66: Shadi Ghadirian, *Untitled* from the series *Like Every Day*, 2000, see also p. 19

Unless otherwise noted, all photos © 2016 Museum Associates/LACMA. Additional credits for works (in order of appearance): cover, p. 17: © Newsha Tavakolian; p. 3, 15: © Hojat Amani, photo courtesy of Janet Rady Fine Art; p. 5, 11: © Sherin Guirguis; pp. 7–9: © Ahmed Mater; p. 13: © Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian, and Iman Raad; p. 19, 66: © Shadi Ghadirian; pp. 21–23: © Dadbeh Bassir, courtesy of Aaran Gallery Tehran and the artist; pp. 25–27, 51: © Maimouna Guerresi, courtesy Mariane Ibrahim Gallery; p. 29: © Ammar Al Beik; p. 31: © Abbas Kowsari and Ag Galerie; p. 33: © Hassan Hajjaj; p. 35: © Fereydoun Ave; p. 37: © Siamak Filizadeh; p. 39: © Pouya Afshar; p. 41: © Kamran Sharif; p. 43: © Elham Rokni; p. 45: © Doğançay Foundation; pp. 47–49: © Faig Ahmed, 2015; p. 53: © Wafaa Bilal; p. 55: © Nasser Al Salem; p. 57: © Lulwah Al Homoud, 2015; p. 59: © Hadieh Shafie; p. 61: © Iman Safaei, courtesy of Shirin Gallery and artist; p. 63: © Shoja Azari, courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York/Dubai

